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SUBJECT: MALAWI: MULUZI BACKS TEMBO FOR PRESIDENT

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Former president Bakili Muluzi finally endorsed Malawi Congress Party (MCP) candidate John Tembo for president in a joint rally in Blantyre on April 18. In addition to kicking off the United Democratic Front (UDF) - MCP coalition, the rally answered several key questions about the alliance: 1) Muluzi will continue to challenge the Malawi Electoral Commission's (MEC) ruling that he is ineligible, but will not run this time; 2) if elected, Tembo (not Muluzi) will run the coalition government, but Tembo will "save" Muluzi (presumably from prosecution) and restore his rights and privileges as a former president; and 3) Tembo will keep UDF-defector Brown Mpinganjira as his running mate. Comment: The Tembo-Muluzi alliance unites two political heavyweights and could make Malawi's election more competitive. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Former president Bakili Muluzi and MCP leader John Tembo launched their election coalition with a large rally in Blantyre on April 18. At the rally, Muluzi declared unequivocally for the first time that the UDF would support Tembo's candidacy for president. Muluzi said he would not withdraw his court challenge to the MEC's ruling that he was ineligible to run himself, but he indicated that, at least for now, he would not stand this May. Addressing UDF supporters at the rally, Muluzi used a folksy reference to a local game, saying it taught him to know the odds, but he assured the crowd that he still led the UDF and that the party would continue to exist separately from the MCP. Both Tembo and Muluzi stated that MCP and UDF parliamentary candidates will compete head-to-head in May's elections.

¶3. (U) For his part, John Tembo made it clear that he would be the head of state if elected president, but said he would "protect" Muluzi. Tembo added that he would ensure Muluzi received all rights and benefits that the constitution provides for a former president. Tembo also said that UDF-defector Brown Mpinganjira would remain his running mate despite the UDF's stance that Mpinganjira left the party to join Tembo's ticket.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Muluzi's announcement likely marks the end of his ill-fated attempt to run for president in 2009. It is too early to tell how many UDF supporters will heed Muluzi's call to back Tembo. Tembo hopes that the coalition will help him pick up votes outside of his traditional stronghold in the Central Region. Some believe Muluzi is continuing to challenge the MEC decision solely to avoid the appearance of defeat, but an eventual ruling in favor of Muluzi could open the door for a potential 2014 run. For now, Tembo and Muluzi have united in a marriage of convenience. They have agreed to develop a common manifesto for governing Malawi, but all bets are off if the unlikely scenario of the courts ruling in Muluzi's favor before May 19 comes to pass. End Comment.  
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